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ABSTRACT

The education of First Nations people has been used primarily for assimilation purposes. The last 30 years have witnessed the beginnings of First Nations' control of education with the primary impetus being self-determination. Achieving self-determination through education has been hindered by the social and cultural problems associated with colonization. To combat colonization and effect healing, the concept of wholistic education has been offered. Wholistic education describes the pedagogical approach that develops the whole First Nations child: intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. A wholistic education is compatible with traditional tenets of Native peoples' conceptualizations of well-being and the good life. The standardized Ontario provincial curriculum obstructs self-determination by interrupting the transmission from Elder to child of Indigenous knowledge and understanding of the earth, omitting Indigenous perspectives on history, presenting Indigenous world views as irrational and unscientific, and not using Indigenous languages. Wholistic education can effect cultural survival by providing an education that affirms Indigenous world views and traditions, restores the role of the land and Nature as teachers, teaches history from a Native perspective, restores the Elders to their rightful place as transmitters of Indigenous knowledge, reconnects the generations, and uses Native languages as the medium of instruction. (Contains 19 references.) (TD)

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Reconciling Epistemological Orientations:

Toward a Wholistic Nishnaabe (Ojibwe/Odawa/Potawatomi) Education

by

Alan Ojiig Corbiere

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Reconciling Epistemological Orientations: Toward a Wholistic Nishnaabe (Ojibwe/ Odawa/ Potawatomi) Education

Alan Ojiig Corbiere

The education of First Nations people has primarily been used for assimilation purposes. The last 30 years have witnessed a turn of events whereby First Nations people have started to assume control of education with the primary impetus being self-determination. Achieving self-determination through education has been hindered by the social and cultural problems associated with colonization. To combat colonization and effect healing, the concept of wholistic education has been offered. Wholistic education describes the pedagogical approach to educating First Nations people that develops the whole child: intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. A wholistic education is compatible with traditional tenets of First peoples' conceptualizations of well-being and good life. The article outlines the obstruction of self-determination through the implementation of a standardized provincial curriculum. Discussion then focuses on the epistemological and pedagogical shifts required effectively to use First Nations' orientations, sources of knowledge, and teaching practices to effect a wholistic education.

In 1996 the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples stated that First Nations people:

> want education to prepare them to participate fully in the economic life of their communities and in Canadian society... [and] that education must develop children and youth as Aboriginal citizens, linguistically and culturally competent to assume the responsibilities of their nations. (p. 433)

This sentiment can be traced back to the time of the treaties when First Nations leaders stipulated that teachers be sent to our communities to teach young *Nishnaabeg* (Ojibwe, Odawa, Potowatomi people) about obtaining a living that was congruent with a sedentary lifestyle. Arguably, earning a living in modem society requires transactions with society at large, and thus some English proficiency is necessary. In essence, then, we First Nations people want our languages and cultures to flourish, but we also want to participate in the economy, which means speaking English. It would appear that the two goals are at cross purposes, and indeed these goals have been presented as incompatible by the English-only movement (Ayoungman, 1995; Berlin, 1999; Reyhner, 1999). However, recent research has indicated that a well-planned and well-executed bilingual education can enable these two types

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of competing goals to be more compatible (Berlin, 1999; Fishman, 1991; McCarty, 1992).

I start with my primary assumption: *Nishnaabemwin* (Ojibwe/Odawa language) instruction in Ontario First Nationsl schools has been undertaken as a means to cultural survival. Many Elders, language advocates, and leaders state that without our language our culture will die. In an effort to lessen and reverse such a trend, many people have suggested different program models to revitalize language, such as the famous Maori language nests, the California master-apprentice program, and the Hawai'ian Early Education Program (Reyhner, 1999). The research in this article does not delve into which program is best suited for a particular situation; rather I examine how mother tongue language instruction combined with an epistemological shift in First Nations schools can achieve the educational goals of increased Native student self-esteem, pride in one's heritage, and positive identity formation (Hebert, 1995).

Fostering individual self-esteem and pride in one's ethnicity is inextricably linked to group identity (Drapeau, 1995; Fishman, 1991). Popular images of the group (Native people) have largely been negative. Even when the image is a positive stereotype, it is usually positive in relation to the purposes of the dominant society, that is, good Indians help white people, such as Pocahontas and Squanto (Berkhofer, 1978; Cornelius, 1999; Francis, 1991). A positive image of Native people should be derived from the people's notion of positive identity. Imparting to young Native people a positive identity through education usually means using the group's language, customs, and knowledge, as well as telling history from their perspective (Hampton, 1995; Hebert, 1995; Stairs, 1995). To date formal schooling has not achieved much of the above (Cornelius; Hampton; Stairs). This lack of success can be attributed partly to the current and past epistemological orientation of educational endeavors directed at or involving Native people of North America. I draw on the work of Hampton to demonstrate the varied purposes and the continuum of "Indian education." I then explain the effects of the present education system on Native people. This is followed by a discussion of the role of Native epistemological orientations in developing a wholistic education.

Fostering a positive self-image and forming a healthy identity are inherent in wholistic education. Wholistic education strives to develop a child intellectually, spiritually,

emotionally, and physically. *Nishnaabemwin*, our mother tongue, is the principal medium by which this wholistic education can be attained. However, mere language instruction will not ensure a wholistic education. In fact a poorly implemented and ineffective Native language program can have the opposite effect: it can diminish one's self-perceived "cultural competence" (Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer, 1998; Hebert, 1995). Indeed, Hebert notes that although many First Nations schools have implemented a Native language program, the goals of which are clearly social-cultural in nature, the instructional method used employs a structuralist-grammatical approach that does not facilitate such personal development. The structuralist-grammatical approach is characterized by emphasis on word lists, verb paradigms, and syntactical structures, all of which are required but do not explicitly delve into the nexus of culture-language or personal and social development (Hebert). In such situations the method and means do not match the goals (Berlin, 1999; Dauenhauer & Dauenhauer; Hebert).

Similarly, mere language instruction does not automatically effect cultural survival. For example, missionaries often learned our languages in order to convert Indigenous people from supposed "heathens and pagans" to "civilized" Christians. In such cases Indigenous languages may have survived longer because the priests and missionaries used them. The missionaries also translated the Bible and other religious literature into many Indigenous languages, thereby preserving these languages in written form, but cultural survival was not effected. We must bear in mind that our languages were sometimes used in the colonization process.

Colonization and assimilation have historically accompanied each other. Throughout the colonization process education has largely been used to assimilate Indigenous people. Hampton (1995), in his article "Towards a Redefinition of Indian Education," details the purposes of Indian education and explains that there are five stages in the continuum:

1. Traditional Indian education (prior to contact);
2. Education for self-determination (involving a few test schools that were shut down by the United States government and which included Cherokee, Creek, and Yup'ik);

3. Education for assimilation (the infamous residential schools);
4. Education by Indians (Native educators administering an Anglo curriculum, employing Anglo methods and values); and
5. Indian education *sui generis:* Hampton calls this Indian education "a thing of its own kind," that is, an education that is based on the learning styles and teaching methods employed by Native people in historic and contemporary times. (I rephrase stage 5 to a Nishnaabe education delivered by Nishnaabe people that is based on and affirms Nishnaabe epistemology, Nishnaabe pedagogy, and Nishnaabe way of life).

In this continuum we are currently at stage 4, education by Indians, which is the administration of a standardized curriculum prescribed by the Province of Ontario. I provide a brief analysis of the resultant learning outcomes of stage 4 in order to demonstrate where cultural survival is obstructed.

In 1995 I listened to a presentation on the Akwesasne Math and Science project. This was a community-based education initiative that strove to increase the number of Mohawk students in math and science. The presenters stated that their first task was to ask the Elders what a science program should consist of. The Elders responded by noting that currently the young go to school on reserve, but then leave the reserve to attend secondary and postsecondary school. On returning the educated young may know the Latin names and classification system of flora and
fauna, but they do not know the difference between an ash and a willow. Furthermore, they do not know the Mohawk names of those trees, nor do they know the stories, songs, and uses of those trees. In short the educated young do not know the cultural importance and roles of local plants, animals, birds, fish, and land in the cosmology and belief system of the people. The result for this generation of educated young people is that the local Indigenous knowledge has been supplanted by a foreign knowledge and understanding of the environment. Therefore, the first learning outcome of standardized curriculum is the interruption of the transmission from Elder to child of Indigenous knowledge and understanding of the earth.

Intimately tied to this knowledge about the local environment is oral history. In a

school that administers and implements the standardized provincial curriculum, our Indigenous perspectives on history - regional and local - are often omitted. By the time I left elementary school I knew far more about Confederation and the American War of Independence than I knew about the signing of the treaties in our territory (Great Lakes region). Thus the second learning outcome of a standardized curriculum is an impoverished (or in my case, virtually nonexistent) understanding of local history from the perspective of Native people.

The third learning outcome of a standardized curriculum is more difficult to address because it involves belief and world view. Most provincial curricula are based on a linear, western, and "rational" view of knowledge and reality. In such an orientation, our *aansookaanan* (legends) and *dbaajmowinan* (narratives) are relegated to the negative connotations of myth and fairytale (Dumont, 1992). Presented in a scientific, linear, and "rational" classroom, the *aansookaanan* and our understandings of the world are irrational, nonlinear, and most of all "unscientific," that is, scientifically unverifiable. Approaching First Nations education from this orientation results in the rationalization and "despiritualization" of the Nishnaabe world view.

Many of the problems associated with these three learning outcomes could conceivably be addressed without *Nishnaabemwin*. However, the *aansookaanan,* the *dbaajmowinan,* and the cosmology of the Nishnaabeg are best expressed through our mother tongue. I am not advocating segregation or the complete dismissal of western science. Rather I am concerned that teaching and learning in our schools focus primarily on mastering the provincially determined learning outcomes at the expense of First Nations determined learning outcomes. I believe a powerful silent message is sent to Native students when our education staff do not use our languages, our stories, or our perspectives in Native/Indigenous education. The message is this: If something is not used, then it is not important. How does the omission and non-use of our languages and our knowledge systems affect our children? What are the spiritual effects, the emotional effects, and the intellectual effects? To a certain extent omission of our languages and understandings perpetuates the erroneous colonial notion of our inferiority. Seeking an education that is wholistic must address these issues. Similarly, a

language program that is undertaken as a means of cultural survival must acknowledge and address the disparities between western epistemology and Nishnaabe (and other Native peoples') epistemology. If provincial textbooks are merely translated into our mother tongue, are we effecting cultural survival? I do not think so. It thus becomes apparent that undertaking cultural survival in a standardized, prescribed provincial education is a difficult, although not impossible, task.

So how do we effect cultural survival through a wholistic education? Essentially, the three learning outcomes discussed above must be supplanted with learning outcomes that are determined by Native people. A Nishnaabe-based curriculum seeks to widen and strengthen the knowledge and traditions of Nishnaabe (or any First Nations) people by providing the young with an education that affirms and is congruent with the world view, belief, and tradition of our ancestors. (Again this does not mean that western education is totally discarded).

Innes (1999), in a study of the Native intellectual in academia, states that the three conduits of Native epistemology are the land, the stories, and the Elders. Similarly, Auger (1998), in his article *Empowerment Through First Nation Control of Education: A Sakaw Cree Philosophy of Education,* lists the following as sources of knowledge: Elders, Animals, Land, and Spiritual Messengers. Both Innes and Auger are Cree. However, the tenets they provide may be applicable to many First Nations. Notice that the conduits or sources of knowledge they list are actually blocked in a general provincial curriculum. In most of our schools (some postsecondary schools being the exception) Elders are "relieved" of their duties as teachers and sources of knowledge. The land (this category includes plants and geological formations) and animals are largely "objects" of study. Both the land and the life contained thereon are stripped of their roles as teachers or knowledge sources as well, and more often than not spiritual messengers are not even discussed.

Standardized education culminates in a detachment - perhaps displacement - of our Native identity, because our identity (Ojibwe/ Odawa, Potowatomi) is based on the natural world. Our names often refer to animals. Our spirit guardians are animals, birds, fish, or spirits such as thunderers and water-spirits. Our clans, our social organizational frameworks, consist

of animals, fish, and birds. Our collective identity as Native people is interwoven with place and community.

Another dimension of Nishnaabe knowledge is the maintenance and development of relationships (Wolfe et al., 1992). These relationships are to the immediate and extended family, the clan, the animals, the ancestors, *Mshkakmik-kwe* (the Earth mother), and *Gichi-Manidoo* (the Creator). A standardized or "rational" curriculum - a curriculum that emphasizes detached observation and controllable, repeatable experiments - does not necessarily engender conditions for development and building relationships. In other words, the elements and precepts of Native identity as conceived by Native people are not meaningfully considered or incorporated into the rational curriculum. The standardized provincial curriculum lacks understandings and pedagogical methods crucial to effecting a wholistic education as defined and grounded by traditional Nishnaabe lifeways.

A First Nations curriculum that is *sui generis,* that is, "a thing of its own kind," serves the purposes of its writers just as the provincial curriculum serves the purposes of its writers. For example, the Province of Ontario administers a curriculum that omits treaties in Ontario. The same provincial government consistently challenges First Nations treaty rights in court in an attempt to abrogate those rights. The recommended history textbook for grades 6 - 8 in Ontario elementary schools has a unit that discusses a treaty: Treaty 8 with the Blackfoot Confederacy in Alberta. On the surface the Ministry of Education is including Native content, even treaty issues, just not treaty issues in Ontario. A First Nations curriculum that serves the purposes of its writers would make a conscious effort to expose such omissions and lip service and address them. Further, a First Nations curriculum undertaken as a means of cultural survival must make cultural survival its explicit goal, which means using First Nations perspective and voice regarding history.

This poses problems for academic historians because First Nations accounts are often imbued with phenomena and people that are considered "fantastic." First Nations accounts of historical events often include people capable of metamorphosis or receiving messages from animals and the spirit world (Dumont, 1992; White, 1998). These types of events are crucial to the understanding of history in the Native person's mind. However, to the historian these are

details that if recorded might discredit that historian's work. In order to effect cultural survival, First Nations epistemology must be re-embedded and re-membered in First Nations education. This means that all the "fantastic details" should be included. It also means that Elders should take their rightful place in our education once again as the transmitters, innovators, and purveyors of this knowledge.

This is yet another purpose of a wholistic education: reconnecting the generations. Day schools and residential schools have often created a chasm between generations. The purpose of a wholistic education is to increase the level of shared meaning between the Elders and the young. To illustrate, I refer to a dialogue that linguist Basso (1996) recorded while researching Western Apache discourse. A young woman who was experiencing some personal difficulties went to visit her aunts. To alleviate her pain and distress the older women talked to her. However, the older women only mentioned place names. Each older woman stated something to the effect that, "Indeed, it happened at [Apache place name] ." After stating that one line, the next older woman followed with a different place name. Some time passed, and the young woman felt more at ease, and they proceeded with their visit. The young woman was helped because each of the place names is connected to a story with moral meaning. The mere mention of the place name conjured up the story and the teaching or moral contained in it. The land through the place name became the metaphor through which the healing (or at least the alleviation of pain) occurred. This is a demonstration of a high degree of shared meaning connected to a specific land or territory. The requirements for such an interchange are the mother tongue, the place names, and intimate knowledge of the stories connected to those places and people. The exchange is shorthand; the older women do not need to tell the whole story, nor does the young woman need to hear the whole story again. This exchange occurred between people separated by at least two generations. Based on my personal observations of interactions that currently take place among individuals in my First Nation, such an exchange between generations is unlikely to occur. The place names have been supplanted, most young people have not heard the stories, and only the people over 40 years of age speak our mother tongue. This gap in meaning between generations must be reconciled if we are to effect a wholistic education.

In conclusion, I offer that a First Nations education *sui generis* is synonymous with an education that is wholistic. First Nations education undertaken for cultural survival should take calculated measures to restore shared meaning and to affirm our way of life through the use of our story, our land, our identity, and our language. Finally, educating our people using our languages as the medium can develop an individual intellectually, emotionally, physically, and spiritually.

Notes

1. Although the focus of this article is Ontario First Nation schools, I believe that the concepts and perspectives covered are applicable to many schools in Canada.

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